

SUMMARY

The discovery of documents

In the summer of 1965 the author participated in a German research project devoted to the anthropological study of the Sherpa, a Himalayan population of Eastern Nepal. The author's primary task was to collect detailed data for a demography of this people. In the course of their research, several members of the team and the author discovered certain significant documents. These documents, found in private houses, in temples and in Buddhist monasteries of the Nyingmapa sect, were of mixed character: Some, written in Tibetan, interwove old Tibetan or Sherpa mythological concepts with real genealogical enumerations of Sherpa ancestors and historical (or semi-historical) accounts of events extending over four to five centuries.

With the exception of one, the *Clear and Mirrorlike Description of the Genesis of Heaven and Earth*, which is a version of a widespread cosmogony in Buddhist countries, these Tibetan language documents can on the whole be classified as original Sherpa texts. It is difficult to estimate their age. The most important of them, the *Ruyi* or *The Report on the Bones* (bones meaning patrilineal clans), is probably four hundred years old.

Other documents were written in Nepali and date back to the late 18th and the first half of the 19th centuries. These are of purely historic content and throw light on the relations of the Sherpa with the authorities of the then newly established state of the Gurkha rulers of Nepal. These relations were based on mutual respect and a tolerant laissez-faire policy on the part of the government.

Reconstruction of the Sherpa clan-history and colonization

The discovery of the above mentioned documents rendered it possible for the first time to formulate a number of historic hypotheses concerning the original homeland of the Sherpa people, their migrations and final settlement in Solu-Khumbu and the expansion of their clans. These hypotheses are also supported by oral traditions of the Sherpa and by the application of statistical data, collected during the expedition. The more or less conjectural history of the Sherpa may be summarized as follows:

The Sherpa, now forming a distinct ethnic group among the hilltribes of the Himalayas with a population of more than 13000 individuals in their main dwelling area of Solu-Khumbu, were not always inhabitants of Eastern Nepal. Their ancestors came to their present home in the region of Mt. Everest from a district called Salmo Gang in the Eastern Tibetan province of Kham. This migration of more than 1250 miles took place at the turn of the 15th to the 16th century, as indicated by a Tibetan historiographic date: One of the emigrants was a pupil of Tertön Ratna Lingpa, a famous religious scholar, who lived from 1401 to 1477 A. D.

The reasons for this exodus can only be guessed. One of the texts discovered states that the emigration took place at a time of political tension between Kham and powerful neighbors in the North, the Mongols. These had in fact undertaken several military expeditions from the Kokonor to the South. It is therefore possible that the Sherpa's ancestors left their homes under outside pressure or at least in consequence of the general unrest created by

the Mongol invasions. The same motive also caused the ancestors of the royal house of Sikkim to leave Kham at nearly the same time.

It must be pointed out however that the exodus of the Sherpa's ancestors was not a mass migration involving a whole tribe. On the contrary, only a small group consisting of four proto-clans left Kham, and this explains, why only the descendants of these proto-clans (Serwa, Minyagpa, Thimmi and Chakpa) are nowadays considered as pure Sherpa.

According to the documents the first immigrants did not proceed immediately to Solu-Khumbu, but — after their long march — they settled for a few decades in the Tinkye area south of the Tsomo Tretung-Lake (see map), a region west of Central-Tibet. But they abandoned their new homes again, this time disturbed by the rumours of the arrival of mighty invaders from the West. The *Ruyi* calls these invaders Döhor Durkhi.

If this invasion from the West is of historical relevance at all it must be identical with the campaign of Sultan Sa'id Khan of Kashgar and his general, Mirza Muhammad Haidar Dughlat, against Tibet (1531 to 1533 A. D.). These two Moh mmedan religious fanatics first marched against Ladakh and Kashmir. Later the general extended the campaign almost as far east as Lhasa and was stopped only by an outbreak of disease. Haidar Dughlat's aim, the destruction of the city temple of Lhasa and the subjection of the "Tibetan idolators", was therefore not wholly executed. His march, however, may have caused the Sherpa's ancestors to take refuge in the remote Himalayan mountains.

At any rate, the Sherpa proto-clans left the Tinkye area, crossed a high pass called Nangpa La (5716 m) and finally settled down in Solu-Khumbu. At the time of their arrival these regions of Eastern Nepal must have been totally uninhabited. Only the southernmost parts of Solu may have been occupied by earlier settlers, the Rai. But there are no reports or other evidence of a major struggle during the following 2½ centuries. Thus the Sherpa could spread over Solu-Khumbu, unhindered by any outside power or local opponents. The story of the colonization of Solu-Khumbu is the story of the different proto-clans, their expansion and subsequent fission and the rise of independant sub-clans. A general pattern applying to all proto-clans can be observed:

1. Each of the different clans selects a clearly defined locality for settlement and demarcates the boundaries of its clan-property.
2. The number of a clan's members increases and the small settlements develop into the first discernable clan-villages, the centers of clan-activities.
3. From the first clan-villages new satellite settlements are founded within the confines of a clan's area.
4. The new settlements also grow and become independant clan-villages.
5. The dislocalisation produces an increasing disintegration of the original homogeneous proto-clans.
6. The final result of disintegration is the split of the proto-clans into several sub-clans, which adopt new clan-names.

Thus, the Minyagpa proto-clan of the Sherpa ancestors split in the course of its expansion into eight sub-clans (Gardza, Trakto, Gole, Shire, Binasa, Pankarma, Yülgongma and Kapa). All of these still exist. From the Thimmi proto-clan originated five surviving sub-clans (Salaka, Khambadze, Paldorje, Gobarma and Lakshindo).

It may be remarked that today the members of any two subclans descended from a common proto-clan regard one another as *brother-clans* (*pingla*). The practice of exogamy is still observed among such brother-clans, although not as strictly as that of a sub-clan. This clearly shows the Sherpa's consciousness of their clan-history.

The remaining two proto-clans, on the other hand, the Chakpa and the Serwa, did not proceed to step 6. They kept their original clan-names. But from them, too, developed numerous lineages and they founded branches of their clan in many villages.

In Solu, where Sherpa traditions have remained most intact (and where all the documents were found), many of the pure single-clan-villages have survived to the present day (see map). But in Pharak and in Khumbu, the other two distinct regions of Sherpa-land, the contours of single-clan-villages have been blurred. Here male members of other clans were permitted to settle in a clan's village-territory. In addition, groups of new immigrants, almost exclusively from the Tibetan side, infiltrated these two regions.

Of the new immigrants to Solu-Khumbu, who (in various degrees) were integrated into Sherpa society, one can distinguish three successive categories: the *newer clans*; the *pseudo-clans*; and the *Khamba*. All of these immigrants came to Solu-Khumbu within the last 150 years, that is, more than 250 years after the arrival of the proto-clans.

The members of the newer clans are organized in true patrilineal clans, just as the offsprings of the proto-clans. For that reason they too are considered as pure Sherpa. There are, however, some considerable differences between the two: None of the newer clans has any scriptural tradition concerning its genesis and descent. None of them claims Eastern Tibet as its original homeland as do all the proto-clans. Besides that, their geographical dispersion is limited to Khumbu. The number of their members is very small; the population of the old clans is 37 times greater than that of the newer clans, although they number 7 clans (Nawa, Lhukpa, Chusherwa, Sherwa, Shangup, Jungdomba and Mende), whereas the proto-clans number only 4. There is only one explanation for this numerical disproportion: Their ancestors came to their present habitat at a much later date than the proto-clans. Most probably all these newer clans came from the surroundings of Dingri, the adjacent area north of the Nangpa La.

A noteworthy phenomenon can be observed among the pseudoclans, the second category of newer immigrants. Their members — with the exception of one group, the Dhukpa or Bhutanese — are the descendants of people belonging to other ethnic groups of Nepal such as Tamang, Newar, Gurung and Chetri, who had entered into marital or casual unions with Sherpa girls. The offspring of these alliances living now in Pharak and Khumbu have been totally assimilated by the Sherpa. They wear Sherpa dress and ornament, have Sherpa names, speak the Sherpa language and follow the Buddhist religion. They call themselves alternatively Sherpa or Tamang, Newar, etc. But in their case the ancient ethnic name has changed its significance. It became a substitute for a clan-name. The ethnic name became thus the sign of a distinct exogamous unit. Consequently, a Tamang-Sherpa of Pharak may not marry a Tamang girl of this region, only Sherpa. This practice runs counter to the endogamous character of ethnic groups in other parts of Nepal. The ethnic exogamy of the pseudo-clans is their strongest acculturative concession to Sherpa culture. All Sherpa, however, are aware of the foreign origin of the pseudo-clans.

The third mentioned category of newer immigrants to Solu-Khumbu consists of the so-called Khamba. The word *Khamba* is derived from Tibetan: *Kham pa*, meaning *those from Kham*. Among the Sherpa, however, the word has a wider meaning. All people who immigrated from the north to Khumbu within the last four generations and who did not belong to one of the above mentioned categories of settlers were labelled as Khamba. Most of the Khamba ancestors came from the Tibetan districts of Dingri or Kyirong. Some of them came from the West Nepalese areas of Mustangbhot and Manangbhot. The most significant feature of the Khamba is that they have no real exogamic clans. Although many of the Khamba carry names which look like clan-names, these are not acknowledged as such by the pure Sherpa. Lacking this important status symbol, the clan-name, the Khamba are considered as slightly inferior to the rest of the Sherpa. This inferiority may also be partly due to the fact that many of the Khamba are the children or grandchildren of economically poor Tibetan immigrants who have not yet been able to attain a normal standard of wealth. Most of the Khamba have settled in Khumbu. A certain number of them also live in Pharak. Hardly any of them live in Solu.

All the above mentioned categories of immigrants who came at different times to Solu-Khumbu are the constituent elements of what nowadays is known as the Sherpa people. 90% of this people are the direct descendants of the proto-clans. These descendants form the social core. The other three constituents, namely the newer clans, the pseudo-clans and the Khamba, are in a way the outsiders of the society.

Besides the Sherpa other settlers found their homes within the geographical boundaries of Solu-Khumbu. They belong to such tribal groups as the Gurung, Magar, Newar, Tamang, Sunwar and Rai, or to Nepalese Hindu casts, the Brahmin, Chetri, Kami, Damai, Gharti and Bhujel (see tables IIa and IIb). The majority of these settlers moved from the western parts of Nepal to the east. Their resettlement started at the beginning of the 19th century and continues sporadically until the present. In Solu they founded their own villages and communities without intermingling with the Sherpa.

Demography

For the results of the demographic inquiries the reader may refer to the various charts and tables gathered in this work.

Social organization and structure

The Sherpa are organized, as stated previously, in patrilineal, exogamous clans. The written genealogies of the Sherpa ancestors testify that this was so since the earliest times: only males are named in the genealogies as ancestors; the mother's line, called *sha* meaning *flesh*, is never transmitted. But only *bones* (i. e. the patrilineal clans) and *flesh* together compose the living being, according to Sherpa philosophy.

Clan-integrity, although it has continuously diminished since the time when each clan had one single coherent clanterritory, is still expressed in several ways. Some of the clan-villages of Solu still do not permit any male stranger, or even a son-in-law, to settle in their area, as this would conflict with the character of single-clan-villages. Also, several of the clans have their special deities, represented by surrounding mountains. These are worshipped exclusively by the members of the appropriate clans. Finally, each of the major

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Solu-clans has its own high pastures, which may be used only by the herds of members of the owner-clan; they can however be rented to strangers.

A very important social unit in Sherpa-society is the nuclear family. It enjoys a great amount of independence. To found an economically self-reliant nuclear family with a house of its own is the aim of every marriage. It is statistically proven that most of the Sherpa houses are inhabited by nuclear families only.

Marital residence is nearly always virilocal. The right of inheritance is clear and simple: All children have claims to their parents' property. The sons inherit house, land and livestock in equal proportions, whereas daughters may inherit only movable goods, such as jewellery, household furniture, money. In the absence of sons, the inheritance is passed on to the brothers (or their deceased's sons). Only in very rare cases is a son-in-law (Sherpa: *maksu*) selected as heir.

The Sherpa practice of inheritance has one inevitable consequence, the continuous splitting up of ancestral estate. This process, immanent in the system, can temporarily be stopped by one particular form of marriage, which therefore is quite frequent, i. e. by fraternal polyandry. The Sherpa are very conscious of the advantages of fraternal polyandry. To say it in their own words: A girl who marries two brothers is very wise, because in this case she „will participate in a double heritage”, and concerning the brothers „the father's estate remains intact”.

8% of Sherpa marriages are polygamous, 5% being polyandrous, about 3% polygynous. The remaining 92% of marriages are monogamous. Polygynous marriages are in general successive, that is, a man will take a second wife — usually his first wife's younger sister — only after it has become evident that the first will bear him no children.

Following the classification and typology of MURDOCK, Social Structure, the components of the Sherpa social organization may be concisely summarized thus:

- Descent: P — patrilineal descent with exogamy
- Cousin terms: O — Omaha type; in this type FaSiDa (Sherpa: *tsabyung*) and MoBrDa (Sherpa: *uru*) are called by different terms and terminologically differentiated from sisters (eSi = *aji*, ySi = *num*) and parallel cousins (FaBaDa = *aji* and *num*; MoSiDa = *mawin*), but FaSiDa (*tsabyung*) is terminologically classed with SiDa (*tsabyung*) and/or MoBrDa (*uru*) with MoSi (*uru*). [These terms, always man speaking, were collected in 1965 and have been compared with those presented by FÜRER-HAIMENDORF.]
- Residence: P — patrilocal
- Clans and demes: C — patrilocal clan-communities
- and: P — patri-clans other than clan-communities
- Other kin group: O — moieties absent
- Exogamy and other Extensions of
- Incest Taboos: B — bilateral extension of incest taboos (all second cousins ineligable)
- and: P — patrilineal extension of incest taboos (including patrilineal exogamy)

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- Marriage: Ms — sororal polygyny permitted but incidence below 20%
 and: Y — general polyandry; [It must be noted that the Sherpa polyandry is fraternal. This category is not provided with in MURDOCK's scheme. One should therefore better use a new sigle: Yf = fraternal polyandry. Besides that, Sherpa polyandry is not general but only occasional.]
- Family: N — independant nuclear families
- Aunt Terms: C — bifurcate collateral; distinct terms for Mo (*ama*), MoSi (*uru*) and FaSi (*ani*)
- Niece Terms: M — bifurcate merging; one term for Da and BrDa (*phum*), another for SiDa (*tsabyung*).

Thus the pattern of the Sherpa social organization with the sequence: P — O — P — CP — O — BP — MsY — N — C — M, corresponds very closely with the ideal of the *Normal Omaha* type of social structure (see MURDOCK, pp. 225 and 239). L. A. WHITE and MURDOCK both consider the *Omaha* type of social structure a mature form of the patrilineate, in fact its most highly developed form.

Marriage

Sherpa marriage is characterized by a number of successive phases and ceremonies, the first of which is called *dri chang* or *asking with beer*. It is a sort of proposal, undertaken by the man's parents in the girl's house. At this time the possible marriage restrictions and taboos are discussed. There are three types of such restrictions, economical, astrological and kinship restrictions.

Economical restrictions means that the parents want to know whether their son or daughter is going to marry within their own class of wealth. Although marriage is mainly based on the mutual attachment of the future couple, parents may try to prevent an "unequal" alliance.

The astrological marriage restrictions of the Sherpa are similar to that of Tibet, perhaps less strict and complicated. Every person, defined by the year of birth, belongs to a particular cyclic animal and a particular element. Certain of these animals and elements stand in hostile relations to one another. On *dri-chang-day* an expert must determine whether the two potential marriage-partners were born under the signs of extreme antagonism. If this is the case, the expert advises against the alliance.

The really prohibitive restrictions are of the third type. Firstly, the rule of exogamy may under no circumstances be violated. Secondly, any marriage between consanguineous relatives is considered as incest; cross-cousin marriage is therefore not allowed, while it is permissible among the neighboring Tamang and among the Gurung. Thirdly, sons and daughters of ceremonial friends (Nepali: *mit*), may not marry, since these latter consider one another as brothers or sisters. Such ceremonial friends, who by a ceremonial act have become fictitious relatives, are to be found very often among the Sherpa, just as in other parts of Nepal.

The second phase of marriage is called *dem chang* or *binding beer*. It is the main marriage ceremony, after which bride and bridegroom are considered as a legal couple. All sub-